

# Mercy

Luke 10:25-37

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/mercy/>

Today, Jesus' teaching brings him into conversation with a lawyer who has all the right answers but not eternal life. He thinks he does, though. And this is perhaps what is most unfortunate about the lawyer. He is not really looking to change, not seeking with his heart or yearning. Instead he is posturing. He wants to test Jesus and, in so doing, make himself feel good.<sup>1</sup> The lawyer already knows the answers to his questions. He is not really interested in Jesus' answer, he only wants to know that Jesus agrees with him.<sup>2</sup> As Richard Rohr said, the lawyer doesn't want to love God, he wants to love himself.<sup>3</sup>

So, when the lawyer asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?", we can assume he already knows the answer to this question as well.<sup>4</sup> He, perhaps, has a long list of the people who he believes he must be neighborly to in accordance with the 613 Jewish laws.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps he also has a long formula for exactly how and when he must be neighborly--what the boundaries of his neighborliness are to be. Maybe, he will be neighborly pretty much all the time, except when there are dogs barking after 10pm, in which case all bets are off because at that point he begins to think about how he can get rid of the dog without anyone connecting him to the crime. Or maybe he will be neighborly as long as everyone follows the rules set forth by the neighborhood's Homeowner's Association: no yard art, grass no higher than 6", no street parking, trash cans removed from the street by 8pm on the day of trash pickup. Jesus is certainly a reasonable man, he surely agrees with the lawyer.

But Jesus can see that the lawyer's questions and presumed answers miss the point. And so he tells a story, a story that is among the most familiar of all Jesus' stories - the parable of the Good Samaritan.

How tempting it is for us to hear Jesus' parable in the same way the lawyer asked the questions. To quickly prescribe or regurgitate answers that help us feel good before God. Because, we've thought about this, right? I already have some pretty good answers about who my neighbor is and what the boundaries of my neighborliness are.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, "The Good Samaritan," *Center for Action and Contemplation*, online: <https://cac.org/the-good-samaritan/> (accessed July 9, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 10:29. All scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

We, in the church over the last 2,000 years, have worked pretty hard at this, and not necessarily with the wrong motives. We've tried to be kind to the people we're supposed to be kind to, help the people we're supposed to help, do the good we're supposed to do.

And I'm not here today to say this is wrong.

But, in the same way Jesus was looking for something more from the expert in the law, maybe he is looking for something more in us.

Much of the scholarly work done on the parable of the Good Samaritan in the mid-late 20th century refers to this parable as an example story. An example story is a literary form that has a straightforward purpose - the example story gives a direct example that is to be imitated or avoided.<sup>6</sup>

So, when we read Jesus' story about the Good Samaritan as an example story, we've got some pretty straightforward directives - be like the Samaritan - show mercy. Don't be like the priest and Levite - don't pass by those who need mercy.

But, when we hear this story in this way - as an example story with a sort of moral prescription for neighborliness - I think we're still operating on the same level the lawyer was with Jesus. Still on this level where we're still just loving ourselves by putting limits on what it means to be a neighbor. Laws, definitions, limits of duty, a five point plan we can follow - all of these can become ways we substitute mercy with obedience that we feel is proof of our faith.<sup>7</sup>

I think staying on this level with the parable of the Good Samaritan sorely misses the point. I have hope that Jesus is looking for something more in us than rules and five point plans. The world is certainly looking for something more.

If the moral of the Good Samaritan story was simply to be neighborly, then why not tell it the other way around? A despised Samaritan beaten and thrown in a ditch, a priest and Levite pass him by, and then a willing Jewish man stop and offer help?<sup>8</sup> If the intended moral were for the lawyer to be neighborly, then telling the story with the characters switched around would clearly show the lawyer his place as good neighbor in the drama.

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<sup>6</sup> John Knox, "The Gospel According to St. Luke: Exposition," *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 195.

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia A. Jarvis, "Luke 10:25-37: Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C*, vol. 3, ed. Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 240.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Graves, "Luke 10:25-37: The Moral of the 'Good Samaritan' Story?," in *Review and Expositor: A Consortium Baptist Theological Journal*, vol. 94, no.2, ed. Dan R. Stiver (Louisville: Review and Expositor, 1997), 271.

If the purpose of the Good Samaritan story were simply a way to gussy up a moral lesson, it would not seem to fit nature of Jesus' teachings which are anything but simple. As one scholar says, "No one would crucify a teacher who told pleasant stories to enforce prudential morality."<sup>9</sup>

The moral of Jesus' story is not simply a lesson on imitating the Good Samaritan and not imitating the priest and the Levite. The truth of Jesus' story is that loving neighbor is not just about doing good, but about having a kind of compassion that changes us, that converts us, a sense of mercy that makes it such that we can no longer hide behind layers of calculated duty and self-important obedience, but instead must cross the road, cross the boundary lines of our comfort zones, and draw near to the one in need of mercy.

The truth of the parable strikes the lawyer not when he imagines the good deeds of the Samaritan but, when, in his imagination, he surveys the story and realizes he does not see himself in the face of the Samaritan, he does not see himself in the faces of the priest or the Levite. It is when he realizes he can only look to the man in the ditch, the one lying naked, beaten, and vulnerable unto death, the one who without lifesaving mercy will meet a cruel end, it is when he realizes he is the man in the ditch that he understands the truth of Jesus' teaching.

When the lawyer finds himself in the story, he also finds Jesus' place in this story, and I think we do too. Jesus is the man who fell among thieves. The Christ-figure in the parable is the man who fell among thieves, beaten and abandoned. When we think about it this way, we can see the allusions to Jesus' death - he will be crucified between thieves after he is beaten and abandoned.<sup>10</sup> Jesus will be rejected by the Jewish religious leaders in the same way the priest and Levite passed by the man in the ditch.<sup>11</sup>

Reading the parable this way, what we might call a Christocentric reading of the text, fits in the bigger picture of Luke's Gospel.<sup>12</sup> At this point in Luke's Gospel, Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem and has begun to explain what is going to happen--that he will undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and on the third day be raised. Seeing Jesus as the man in the ditch foreshadows Jesus' passion in Jerusalem. Seeing Jesus as the man in the ditch helps us to see the very nature of God throughout scripture and history - among the suffering, among the downtrodden, among those robbed of their humanity, among those in need of mercy.

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9 Ibid., 270.

10 Ibid., 272

11 Ibid., 273.

12 Ibid., 273.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a turning point of sorts in Luke's Gospel. If we read the Good Samaritan story with an eye toward Jesus as the man who fell among thieves, we begin to see what it looks like to minister to Christ in his sufferings - the Good Samaritan ministers to the Christ-figure by having compassion on him and going to great lengths to care for him. First we have the example of the Good Samaritan, and then, in just a few verses, Mary will minister to Christ by sitting at his feet and listening to his teaching.<sup>13</sup> As Luke's Gospel unfolds, we see that this is the mark of true discipleship, one who follows Jesus in his passion and ministers to him in his suffering.

The truth of the parable strikes us when we survey the story and can see ourselves as the one lying in the ditch, in need of mercy. That is when we understand compassion. The truth of the parable clicks when we find Jesus where he always seems to be popping up - on the margin, the God who bearing human suffering right there along with us.

Jesus is looking, and longing, and working for something much more than calculated neighborliness. Jesus is inviting us to join him on the rocky and difficult way of love *without* condition, forgiveness that *overcomes* what divides us, and *compassion* that allows us to see one another for who we really are - human - which is to be created and loved by God. Jesus invites us to bear the risks and pain of this way trusting that, on the other side, difficulty and striving gives way to new life.

When we join Jesus on the way of love, and forgiveness, and compassion, if we have eyes to see, we will be changed. The way we see the world will change. The way we see each other will change.

I'd like to share with you a story about my grandfather and an experience that changed his life, an experience that changed my mother's life, an experience that over the course of my life has played a significant role in shaping and re-shaping me.

My mother grew up in rural South Carolina on a farm. Some of my grandfather, Papa Byron's, best friends were the men who helped work the farm. In 1969, when my mother was six years old, one of Papa Byron's best friends, Ranzie Miller, a farmhand, was badly injured in a tractor accident. They took Ranzie to the local hospital where the staff parked his stretcher in the hallway and let him bleed to death. They said it was because he was black, poor, and uninsured.

My mother vividly remembers later that day, Papa Byron, standing in their living room, looking out at the spot in the field where Ranzie was injured, and he was overwhelmed with emotion. My mother says this was one of three times she saw her father cry, and this time was like none before or after. "I never saw my daddy cry like that again."

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13 Ibid., 273.

The story of Ranzie Miller's death so deeply informs the way I read the parable of the Good Samaritan, because, where is Jesus in Ranzie's dying moments but right there on that stretcher with him?

I never got to meet my Papa Byron. He died too soon. But he has taught me some of the greatest lessons of my life, perhaps the greatest of which is that, loving our neighbors is being *moved* by compassion in a way that changes us, and makes it such that we must cross the boundary lines of our comfort zones, and draw near to those in need and go to great lengths to show love and care.

"Which of these do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?" Jesus asked.<sup>14</sup>

"The one who showed him mercy."

And Jesus replied, "Go and do likewise."

*Go and do likewise.*

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14 Luke 10:36-37.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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